

Complex and Contradictory: The Enduring Stardom of Virginia Woolf

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At the time of writing, Adeline Virginia Woolf neé Stephen has 3,293 fans on Facebook. Filed under the category of Celebrities/Public Figures, her profile page is a bustling site of activity, a collage of images and text that celebrate her life and work (See Figure 1). Three electronic “albums” are posted under Adeline Virginia Woolf Photos, such as “Virginia Woolf and Friends,” an album presenting Woolf, her family, and her friends in images of photographs, paintings, and sketches. Woolf also has 13 “fan photos,” images posted by admiring visitors to her page that include Woolf on the cover of *Time* and Woolf’s profile superimposed on a page of text (see Figure 2). Facebook’s “Mini-Feed” application informs viewers that on September 6, 2008, at 8:35 a.m., Adeline Virginia Woolf “wrote a note.” It was titled “Death of the Moth,” and it began, “Moths that fly by day are not properly to be called moths” and closed with “O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.” Fifty-seven fans were compelled to write their own notes to Woolf as well; these appear on her profile’s “Wall” and express devotion through familiar terms. “I just love you virginia,” wrote Marco on November 14, 2008. “[W]e share the same birthday and some of the same mental conditions ^_^,” Robert related on October 18. “Such a great woman, one of the greatest minds of our time,” declared Giorgio on October 15. That Giorgio would not find it problematic to claim Adeline Virginia Woolf for his own “time” is remarkable, considering that Woolf died sixty-three years before she could ever register herself on Facebook. In fact, none of the 3,293 fans who actively

participate on Woolf's page seem to object to her presence on Facebook at all—for all they care, she is still the ethereal twenty-year-old depicted in her profile picture, whose "Personal Interests" include "writing modernist prose," "running Hogarth Press," and "living in Bloomsbury."¹

I do not mean to suggest that Woolf's Facebook fans are somehow deranged or deluded, operating under the false perception that Virginia Woolf really *is* still alive, writing notes, posting electronic albums, and residing at 46 Gordon Square. After all, the first line in her "Personal Information" box tells us that Woolf died on March 28, 1941. When Marco, for example, addresses "virginia" directly with "I just love you," I do not think he envisions Woolf sitting behind her laptop mouthing, "I love you, too." What Woolf's Facebook fans are responding to, interacting with, and in some part, constructing, is not, then, the real person of Virginia Woolf. What they are so intimately engaged with is Virginia Woolf's *image*, one that has been projected upon disparate audiences and one that has resonated among all of them, from the early 1920s to December of 2008. That image has undergone numerous transformations since Woolf emerged as a famous author, and no one can be said to depict her most accurately. This is because Virginia Woolf is a "star"—a multitude of complex and contradictory images projecting meanings across time—and as a star, it impossible to ever "know" Woolf fully, despite her audiences' claims to such knowledge. Whether she is represented as a lovely young sophisticate, a literary genius, an eccentric recluse, a tragic madwoman, a combination of all four, or something else entirely, Woolf remains a star because she refuses to be fixed, and thus, audiences can make of her what they will.

This paper seeks to give Virginia Woolf the "star treatment," so to speak. It builds on the work of Woolf scholars who have only recently begun to investigate Woolf's appearances in popular culture. In a departure from more traditional studies of Woolf, which mostly look to the author's writings and biographical information to find meaning, these scholars have focused on a much broader range of

media texts through which Woolf's image is propagated. They consider Woolf as a commodity, for whether more traditional scholars like to acknowledge it or not, Woolf inhabits realms located far outside canonical literature, and the question of how she gets there is not one that can be answered through literary studies. The most notable of these recent scholars is Brenda Silver, whose 1999 book, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, explores a vast range of Woolf's incarnations "across the cultural terrain."² She considers Woolf's "border-disrupting"³ forays into both high- and lowbrow journalism, advertisements, plays, films and much more in an attempt to determine what she signifies, and what patterns of meaning emerge from those forms. Though I disagree with Silver's claim that all images of Woolf are linked to one particular meaning—fear—I will expand on her case studies in search of more possible meanings that Woolf projects.

To do so, I will be using a method of analysis that has yet to be applied to the figure of Woolf. While many scholars of Woolf's popular image have referred to Woolf as a star (Part 2 of Silver's book is entitled "Starring Virginia Woolf"), few have delved into more precise definitions of the term. In an attempt to validate Woolf's star status, then, as more than a loose expression of her lasting influence and iconicity, I will be employing a version of film scholar Richard Dyer's theory of star construction to the example of Virginia Woolf. I will focus this analysis on two moments in Woolf's stardom—first, a moment when Woolf was still living, from about 1924-1937, and then a contemporary moment, when Woolf's image appeared in the 2002 feature film *The Hours*. I do not wish to propose that my study of these moments will decide some sort of ultimate meaning that Woolf's star image signifies. To make such declarations, I believe, would be reductive. Rather, I hope to suggest that the many *different* meanings that Virginia Woolf represents are indeed what make her a star in the first place, and they explain why her image resonates today.

Virginia Woolf: Enduring as a Star

In the preface to her 1953 biography of Virginia Woolf, Aileen Pippett plainly outlines her literary mission of “trying to reconstruct [Woolf’s] very elusive and complex personality, fragile as a moth and enduring as a star.”⁴ Pippett situates herself as an impassioned fan of Woolf, admitting to a somewhat obsessive admiration of her in her very first sentence: “Before I began to think of writing this book, all I knew about Virginia Woolf was that I had read everything I could by her and about her and that in this way she had become a part of my life.”⁵ Pippett follows this gushing confession with a brief description of her one “memorable” encounter with Woolf—a small party that both she and her beloved author attended in the mid-1930s at which Pippett “remain[ed] quieter than the mice behind the wainscoting,”⁶ content to simply observe Woolf at a reverential distance. While Pippett spotted Woolf in a Bloomsbury attic and not on a Hollywood red carpet, her anecdote reads very much like a star struck account of a celebrity sighting. Awed by Woolf’s presence and humbled by her apparent greatness, it is no wonder that Pippett chose a title for her biography that emphasizes poetic similes even before it introduces Woolf as its subject. This title, “The Moth and the Star: a Biography of Virginia Woolf,” immediately implies that the person of Woolf is negotiated by the various and varying images of her. The very fact that these multiple images of Woolf exist—and that her audiences seek to “know” or “construct” her through them—qualifies Virginia Woolf as a star. Pippett may have compared Woolf to a “star” in the celestial sense, but she may as well have used “star” in the celebrity sense—for Woolf’s image remained complex and pervasive long after her death.

If Aileen Pippett had emerged from behind the “wainscoting” in that Bloomsbury attic to converse with Virginia Woolf, she may have been able to make claims to her personality and character. In actuality, though, Pippett could only understand Woolf as all of us do who consume her as a star—through her images. When star studies developed as an academic field in the late 1970s, film scholar Richard

Dyer's emphasis on constructed images became central to analyses and explanations of stardom. In his landmark text on stardom, *Stars*, Dyer reacts against the notion that stars are a mystical, charismatic breed that audiences can "know" as people, if only they pry long and hard enough into their personal lives. Rather, Dyer argues that stars are calculated productions—not actual people—that we can only experience as a series of mediated images. At the very outset of *Stars*, Dyer does note that "the fact that [stars] are also real people is an important aspect of how they signify, but we never know them directly as real people, only as they are to be found in media texts."⁷ Stars are defined in terms of representations, he suggests, so that if we talk about Virginia Woolf as a star, it is not the same as talking about Virginia Woolf as a person, nor is it the same as talking about her in terms of her work. As a star, she is made of appearances. And as Dyer later argues in his book *Heavenly Bodies*, "appearance is mere illusion, is surface"—is construction, manufacture.⁸

Of course, when Dyer speaks about the manufacture of stars, he focuses on movie stars, especially those produced by classical Hollywood. Many of the stars that Dyer analyzes —Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, and John Wayne, for example—were under strict contracts with major studios, which meant that their employers did much of the work in defining and disseminating their images to audiences. Still, Dyer emphasizes that stars' appearances in films are not the sole determinants of their images; the promotion, publicity, and criticism surrounding stars are also hugely important.⁹ This point is crucial, for it allows for stars to be made, so to speak, even if they never appear in film texts. Although Virginia Woolf quite literally becomes a movie star through her image's appearance in the film *The Hours*, she was and is very much a star without the film. As early as the 1920s, promotion, publicity, and criticism were already key media texts that began to construct Woolf's image, attempting to make meaning out of her growing fame.

Even before Dyer's modified methodology can be applied to Woolf's stardom, some of his qualifications should be noted. Dyer

is careful to point out that promotion, publicity, and criticism (and films) do not simply add up to create one coherent star image.¹⁰ Marilyn Monroe was not simply a sex symbol. Judy Garland was not simply a “girl next door” type. He states:

It is misleading to think of the texts combining cumulatively into a sum total that constitutes the image, or alternatively simply as being moments in a star’s image’s career that appear one after the other—although these emphases are important. The image is a *complex totality* and it does have a *chronological dimension*. What we need to understand is that totality in its temporality is the concept of a *structured polysemy*.¹¹

Dyer opens up his definition of stardom with this concept of structured polysemy. He suggests that not only do varying media texts combine to create star images, but also that these star images are often complex and contradictory. Some texts may emphasize certain aspects of a star, while others may overlook those aspects in favor of others. So, Marilyn Monroe is the sexy ditz in the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, but the publicity over her marriage to Arthur Miller presents her as a budding intellectual.¹² While some features of star images may be more salient than others in star texts, Dyer encourages us to “read” stars with the entire spectrum of these features in mind. There are “multiple but finite meanings and effects that a star image signifies,” he says, “a range of things” that can resonate differently among different audiences, especially across time.¹³ As a star, Virginia Woolf represents a very different “range of things” now than she did during her lifetime—in fact, her image is probably less fixed now than it ever was. That her image is so complex and has undergone such transformations confirm her resonance as a star. If audiences continually consume and reinvent her image, she

must signify a whole network of meanings that prove significant to people over time.

Dyer's classifications of star texts need to undergo slight modification when applied to Woolf's literary figure, but his methodology for star analyses can still be effective in determining her image. For example, Dyer's definition of promotion does not neatly correlate to the promotion involved in Woolf's stardom. Dyer calls promotion "the most straightforward of all the texts which construct a star image, in that it is the most deliberate, direct, intentioned, and self-conscious."¹⁴ For movie stars, promotion may include posters released by the studios, movie trailers, or official press releases. Certainly, none of these materials would have been circulating about Woolf in the 1920s or 1930s. What are important about promotional materials, though, are the deliberate messages they contain and the sites from which they originate. Thus, if the studios are the main production sites for deliberate image making in Hollywood, then Virginia Woolf would have to be the main production site for her own deliberate image-making—before her death, that is.

While Woolf's diaries and letters are often cited as evidence for how she viewed and presented herself to her public, the fact is that these writings were never published for audiences during her life and thus cannot be treated as promotional texts. Furthermore, within these texts, Woolf expresses a sort of refusal to present herself as any particular "type" or "image" before popular audiences—she does not play into promotion, so to speak. Her personal writings suggest that she was very much a modernist in her "hostility to the market" and revulsion of popular appeal.¹⁵ The Hogarth Press did not even print her photos in the fronts or backs of her books.¹⁶ Woolf's appearance in the 1920s British *Vogue* is a crucial exception to her general distaste for popular culture and comes close to fitting Dyer's definition of a promotional text, for she wrote for the magazine and was thus a part of the site that was constructing her image. Still, the scarcity of promotional materials surrounding Woolf testifies to her own discomfort with her developing star image, and at the same

time begins to explain why she remains a star today. In her refusal to be fixed, she allowed her audiences to “version” her, as Silver likes to put it,¹⁷ and they would make multiple versions of her over time.

For movie stars and Woolf publicity texts take similar forms. Dyer distinguishes publicity from promotion in that “it is not, or does not appear to be, deliberate image-making.”¹⁸ Publicity announces itself as more authentic than the supposedly fake images that Hollywood tries to promote.¹⁹ As Dyer explains, “it is found in the press and magazines, radio and television interviews, and the gossip columns” and is “often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of the star.”²⁰ Thus, Virginia Woolf’s appearances in magazines—like her 1937 appearance in *Time*—serve as her publicity texts, ones that seek to get at the “real person” she seems to withhold from the public in order to expand her star image.

Criticism and commentary are essential texts in constructing stardom—especially in the case of Woolf—for they begin to acknowledge the agency of the audience in the formation of the star image. Dyer’s definition of criticism and commentary is somewhat limited, in my opinion, because it only includes “what [is] said or written about the star in terms of appreciation or interpretation by critics and writers.”²¹ Thus, reviews of stars and their performances that appear in mass publications or scholarly journals complete this category for Dyer. The opinions of critics and writers undoubtedly add to the complexity of star images, but the opinions of general audiences are just as illuminating, if not more so. Fan letters to Virginia Woolf can serve as valid forms of criticism and commentary, for example, for they place emphasis on various aspects of her visible identity that further define her stardom.

An investigation of Woolf’s stardom, then, should not be understood as a superficial activity or, worse, a denigration of her life and work. Because Woolf’s image inhabits the popular realm does not mean that Woolf is necessarily corrupted. Rather, Woolf’s star status testifies to the profound meanings she embodies for her many audiences. Neal Gabler expands on Dyer’s claims about the meanings of

stars in his 2003 essay, “Our Celebrities, Ourselves.” Gabler argues against the notion that stars are merely famous for being famous. Instead, he believes that stars bear a “mark of authenticity”²² that inspires audiences to pay attention to them. The narratives that stars make visible—rife with apparent struggles, triumphs, relationship problems, and identity crises—are, in effect, “real-life melodramas”²³ that generate great amounts of investment from viewers. Stars present “chronicles of self-discovery”²⁴ to us, stories to identify with as we attempt to make sense of our roles and our lives in the world around us. From the multiple complex and conflicting images that stars project upon us as viewers, we pick and choose the ones that best speak to us in our time and place, and we use them to establish a sense of meaning for both the star and the self. As P. David Marshall puts it, “the [star] is in many ways the embodiment of the collective power of an invested audience in a particular person.”²⁵ Whether or not the stars (or, more accurately, the “real” people who are attached to star images) intend to mean anything is beside the point. The point is that they do, and audiences decide exactly what they mean based on the polysemic images they present.

Virginia Woolf was never on the cover of *Star*. She never attended the Academy Awards. She was never featured on PerezHilton.com. Yet, Woolf was a star in her own time, however uncomfortable she may have been with popular culture and the prospect of her image having a place there. The promotion, publicity, and criticism surrounding her figure developed images for her even if Woolf did not establish one for herself; in many ways, her audiences wrote her. And she would continue to be rewritten by a multitude of audiences and media texts long after her death, keeping her star burning.

Star Moments: Virginia Woolf’s Lifetime

“...she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that.”

—Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

The question of Woolf’s intent in the production of her own image is one that has an ambivalent answer. In many ways, Woolf

would not say, "I am this, I am that." For one, some of her letters and diaries suggest that she was very much a modernist in her aversion to popular culture and the masses, and as such, she was disinclined to associate her image with either. Woolf's unpublished letter to the British magazine *The New Statesman*, "Middlebrow," is often cited as firsthand evidence of Woolf's modernist elitism. The letter was addressed to an editor at the magazine who had frustrated Woolf in his snobbish depiction of her, and while her tone is certainly tongue-in-cheek, she expresses a condescending distaste for a burgeoning middle class and popular culture. She bemoans "middlebrows" as tasteless and vulgar. They are "betwixt and between," they are those who "[amble and saunter] now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishable, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige."²⁶ That she distances herself from this growing population of "nasty" consumers suggests that Woolf would not wish to be one of their aimless pursuits. If they could "call both Shakespeare and Wordsworth equally 'Bill,'"²⁷ then they could certainly call her "Ginia" if she allowed her image to become familiar to them.

In his essay "Virginia Woolf and Modernism," Michael Whitworth further attests to Woolf's modernist tendency to "[stand] aloof from the masses."²⁸ One of Woolf's diary entries depicts a scene in which she physically looks down upon a crowd on Hampstead Heath, determined to keep her distance from them. She claims, "the crowd at close quarters is detestable; it smells, it stinks," and it was only from far away that "they had the look of a picture."²⁹ Though she says that she appreciated the life and energy of the crowd from her position atop a hill, Woolf swears that she "never for a moment felt [her]self one of 'them.'"³⁰ The notion that she might have been able to identify with crowds, masses, or middlebrows appears to have been anathema to Woolf, and even worse was the notion that they might have been able to identify with her (as "Ginia," perhaps). Based on her opinions of popular culture and mass audiences as

indicated by her personal notes, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Woolf might have been reluctant to propagate her own image among popular audiences. She did not wish to be reduced to a commodity for them to consume.

At the same time, however, Woolf seems to have been very much aware that a public image of her was developing, despite her best efforts to avoid being popularized. In response, she refused to fix herself. In her essay “Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image,” Helen Wussow argues that Woolf had a keen understanding of what viewers do with images—they simplify the subject and claim to have access to its reality. Such an approach fails to acknowledge the plasticity of images, Woolf believed, and in her works and personal writings, she continually emphasized the image’s very subjective nature. For example, by incorporating personal photographs into works like *Orlando* and *Three Guineas*, Woolf made a very Dyer-like implication—images gain meaning from how they are arranged, juxtaposed, and contextualized, and not from the inherent truths they convey. Indeed, Woolf was cognizant of the “new definitions of truth [that] begin to evolve”³¹ when audiences view and interpret images, and in an attempt to resist being defined by viewers “truths,” Woolf would not portray herself as any one thing. In other diary entries, Woolf writes, “[o]ne does *not* want an established reputation”³² and “I have made up my mind that I’m not going to be popular . . . My only interest as a writer lies . . . in some queer individuality.”³³ Woolf professed a desire to withhold a coherent image of herself from popular culture. If she could not prevent her image from being consumed by mass audiences, she would at least try to make that image as “queer” or complex—or polysemic, as Dyer would say—as possible.

Woolf’s appearances in British *Vogue* in the 1920s begin to reveal the many complex images of Woolf that emerged from her hesitation in presenting one of her own. *Vogue* marks an important and complicated exception to Woolf’s refusal to establish a “reputation” for herself among mass audiences, for though she does not directly

say she is “this” or “that” in its pages, she allows her name, face, and writing to create an image for her. It is important to note that the intended audience of British *Vogue* in the 1920s was not exactly “the masses”; as Jane Garrity explains, the magazine was largely geared toward an “elite female audience.”³⁴ Yet it also reached more plebeian readers who “actively aspired to be members of the upper class.”³⁵ I do not wish to suggest that Woolf’s introductions to the public are simultaneously introductions to the masses; like *Vogue*, her audiences were many and diverse, and in some ways, segmented. Rather, I wish to examine how she was portrayed in texts that were received by popular readerships to identify her as a star figure. As mentioned earlier, Woolf’s appearances in British *Vogue* can be understood as the promotional texts of her stardom. Because she published her own work for the magazine, she was part of the site that defined her. Thus, the images of Woolf that emerge from *Vogue* are the most intentional ones that can be said to surround her star figure, and those images are very complex indeed.

In the British *Vogue* articles that covered Woolf in the 1920s, Woolf appears as both a highly fashionable and feminine beauty and a brilliant, progressive intellectual. The first piece that featured Woolf was published in the magazine’s 1924 “Hall of Fame” issue. In it, Woolf is presented in her deceased mother’s “puffy sleeved Victorian dress,”³⁶ her eyes cast downward in a demure yet introspective gaze, her hands folded gracefully atop a table. Underneath the photograph, a caption explains why Woolf is notable: “because she is the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen . . . and is the most brilliant novelist of the younger generation.”³⁷ In this juxtaposition of photograph and text, several meanings are at work. On the one hand, Woolf is a product of tradition, as her mother’s old-fashioned dress and the caption’s reference to her literary father connote. On the other hand, Woolf is fresh and innovative, an emblem of youth and feminine chic, as her position in the “younger generation” and her very presentation to “*Vogue*’s elite female audience”³⁸ imply.

She is also a “brilliant novelist”—a mind and a talent, and her genius is emphasized again in a 1926 issue of *Vogue*, wherein the same photograph of Woolf in her mother’s dress is reprinted next to a review that she wrote. The caption under this picture is an expanded one: “she is the most brilliant and enterprising of the novelists of the younger generation . . . [and] a daughter of the late Sir Leslie Stephen.”³⁹ Here, her intellect is bolstered by claims to her progressiveness. If her brilliance did not express itself through Woolf’s own words (in her review), *Vogue*’s are there to attest to her virtuosity. While Garrity argues that these depictions of Woolf mostly “situate her in the position of child and wife, firmly within the parameters of *Vogue*’s heterosexual economy,”⁴⁰ I am less inclined to provide such a generalization about the work of the two promotional texts. Instead, I propose that the *Vogue* articles offer multiple versions of Woolf’s star image that approach her from very different angles. She is young and feminine; stylish and traditional; intelligent and innovative. The “complex totality”⁴¹ of all of these are Woolf.

In 1937, Woolf was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine (see Figure 3), and as she had no role in the production of the American publication, the article that “versioned” her serves as a key publicity text for her star image. As Silver explains, “Virginia Woolf’s appearance on *Time*’s cover signifies her arrival as a star in the United States.”⁴² She was featured in the popular magazine because her novel *The Years* had become a best-seller. Like *Vogue*, *Time* presents a varied and indefinite image of Woolf, portraying her as challenging, accessible, sophisticated, and insular—all in four pages. She earns “the name of ‘great’” by the magazine for being the “foremost author of her day.”⁴³ Indeed, she is praised as a “literary thoroughbred”⁴⁴ for her extraordinary writing talent. With such brilliance comes great difficulty; Woolf appears demanding to those who dare approach her. But while it may be “hard to tell whether she is writing prose or poetry,” there is “profitable pleasure in puzzling” over her work.⁴⁵ Her inscrutability makes her engaging. And “nervous readers” need not be *too* daunted by Woolf’s imposing intellect, seeing as

she “writes about the common gist of things” and “even her obscurer books have something about them that attracts popular attention.”⁴⁶ At the same time, Woolf appears to be of a higher caliber than her common readers; she is “in appearance a pure pre-Raphaelite,” and also an “Englishwoman of letters . . . with all a young lady’s privileges.”⁴⁷ Perhaps her unlikeness to the common folk accounts for her remoteness; she argues for women’s causes “from her study” and “rarely makes a public appearance.”⁴⁸ In *Time*’s own words, “she is the picture of a sensitive, cloistered woman,” a “tall, gaunt, haunted looking” one who is “careless of her clothes, her face, her graying hair.”⁴⁹

While Silver argues that this last “picture” of Woolf overpowers all images of her in the *Time* article,⁵⁰ it is really only one of many different representations of her that shift from sentence to sentence in the text. As soon as she is declared challenging, she is described as approachable. She is singular in her talent, yet she is grouped with the upper middle class. She engages political issues, but she keeps to herself. She looks like a beautiful “pre-Raphaelite”; she is a spooky “haunted looking” figure. As if the promotional text of *Vogue* did not present enough variations of Woolf, the publicity text of *Time* multiplies her images, expanding her stardom with several more contradictory meanings.

And if the example of *Time* does not bear witness to the ways in which Woolf’s image is constructed for her, perhaps an examination of her fan letters will. In Volume 12 of *Woolf Studies Annual*, Beth Rigel Daughtery catalogs 137 letters from Woolf’s adoring readers that illustrate how her contemporary audiences perceived her. While much of the fan mail provides criticism and commentary on specific works of Woolf, they also address the image of the writer in general—the star image that inspired them to address her with exclamations like “You are a wonder & I love you!”⁵¹ Again, various images of Woolf are represented, and in this case, by sources other than editorial boards. Woolf’s fan letters testify to her resonance as a star among highbrow and “common” readers alike, and in their

reception of her, those readers articulate the complexity of her image as well.

Take, for example, a 1925 letter from wood-engraving artist Eily Darwin, who makes representative claims to “knowing” what Woolf is like, as diverse as her image is. Darwin gushes, “What a strange woman you are—what a mixture—poet—painter—magician—cockney—your touch so light subtle & secure—it takes ones (sic) breath away—& of course I cant (sic) really appreciate your genius to the full not being a literary cove!”⁵² As deferential as Darwin sounds, she feels comfortable describing Woolf’s multifaceted identity. Her star image is familiar to her in all of its various forms. Writing in 1927, cartographer Virginia Tooker claims access to Woolf as well, even though she is only “one of the insignificant persons living off the Brompton road.”⁵³ Tooker views Woolf as an inspiration, saying that her singular example “gives [her] courage” to be unique herself. “I should like to know you—and I do know you,”⁵⁴ she closes, conveying an intimacy with the remarkable woman who deeply moves her. In a 1931 letter, Antonia White expresses a “private and passionate devotion”⁵⁵ to Woolf, pleading to meet with her so that she might make more palpable the star whose image is so present in her life. She confesses:

Years ago I cut a photograph of you out of “Vogue” & stuck it up on my desk in an office and used it to comfort me while I wrote advertisements for corsets and disinfectants and baking powder. There—you see—when one at last breaks down and writes to someone for whom one feels a private and passionate devotion one writes exactly like a housemaid writing to Greta Garbo.⁵⁶

While White admits her embarrassment at approaching Woolf like a movie star, her analogy is not inapt. Based on the admiring yet familiar tone with which all of these readers address Woolf, she not

only seems like a star, she is one. Expanding the versions of Woolf created by *Vogue* and *Time*, her fans build images of her as magical artisan, motivational luminary, and fashionable icon. They further develop the diverse meanings of Woolf that are projected by her promotional and publicity texts, interpreting and appropriating her for themselves.

Indeed, one reader's address to Woolf sums up why her image resonates with so many different audiences across time and space—why she endures as a star. Though Rachel Dyce Sharp was writing in London in 1940, her declaration, “You see you kind of belong to us, and what you do matters enormously,”⁵⁷ speaks for all of Woolf's various viewers. After her death, Woolf's image would appear in circles highbrow, lowbrow, and everywhere in between. She would be in academic journals, advertisements, plays, websites, newspapers, magazines, and much more. Feminists in the 1970s would blazon Woolf on t-shirts.⁵⁸ *The New York Review of Books* would blazon Woolf on tote bags.⁵⁹ In 1993, Bass Ale would use Woolf's image to sell beer.⁶⁰ In 2005, a Portland dog daycare center, “Virginia Woof,” would use her to sell babysitting services for pets. The National Portrait Gallery would print Woolf's image on what would become their best-selling postcard.⁶¹ As her Facebook fans multiply with each passing day, Woolf's influence has surely extended beyond her contemporary audiences. As Silver explains, the “breadth and diversity of places where [Woolf's] name and face appear” prove her vast and lasting iconicity.⁶² Because of the complex star image that developed around her in her lifetime, Woolf remains a star to audiences of all kinds long after her death. That she “belongs” to her viewers is made clear by the continual revisions of her image over time, and as the 2002 film *The Hours* demonstrates, she looks much different now than she did in 1920s British *Vogue* magazines.

Star Moments: Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*

“Is moody, suicidal Virginia Woolf too complicated for cinema?”

—“Ways of Dying,” *The Guardian*

Many Woolf fans who saw *The Hours* would answer *The Guardian*'s question with a resounding “yes.” In an essay entitled “Virginia Woolf’s Nose,” Woolf’s biographer Hermione Lee criticizes the film for neglecting to present an image of Woolf that accounts for her deep complexity. While she commends Steven Daldry’s adaptation of Michael Cunningham’s novel for its “strong idea of what made Woolf’s life heroic,”⁶³ she objects to the darkness that seems so inextricably tied to her figure in the film. “I wish something of Woolf’s gleeful comedy, her hooting laughter, her allure” was made evident in *The Hours*,⁶⁴ she states, before quoting similar complaints from Woolf websites and chat rooms. Such passionate objections to Woolf’s apparent one-dimensional image in the film are interesting for what they suggest about the investment of her audiences. Their strong desire to have the film “get Woolf right” is based on an assumption that they know the “real” Woolf—though they can only access her through mediated images anyway. *The Hours* may emphasize depressing images of Woolf, but the film’s images are no less true than any others. Through the film and its surrounding promotion, publicity, and criticism, Woolf’s star image is only further developed, versioned this time as tragic, tortured genius.

As *The Hours* both begins and ends with scenes of Woolf’s suicide, everything we see of her in the film is colored by her grim death. Indeed, everything we see in the *entire film* is colored by her death, for its narrative cross-cuts between characters of different times and places who are all preoccupied with anxiety, depression, sickness, and suicide as they either read or live out *Mrs. Dalloway*. Though the film only depicts one day in Woolf’s life—the day she begins writing *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923—the suicide frame makes her appear like a walking corpse, living to die. Take, for example, a scene

in which Woolf's niece prepares a funeral for a dead bird. While her sister Vanessa and her nephews laugh and run about the Woolf's garden, Woolf remains by the bird's side, answering her niece's questions about death under the shade of a tree. Several close-ups of Woolf's face focus on her furrowed brow and maniacal gaze; she appears to have been plagued by such questions before. After her niece rejoins her mother and brothers, Woolf continues to fixate on the bird, craning her neck to peer into its eyes before lying down beside it with a pained expression on her face (see Figure 4). Alternating extreme close-ups of Woolf's and the bird's faces draws an affecting parallel; Woolf seems to have an intense vicarious longing for death through the bird.

Woolf's interactions with her husband Leonard in the film also present her as a woman on the brink, even though her end would not come for almost twenty more years. In one of the key dramatic moments of a film already dripping with emotional tension, Leonard faces off with Virginia in the Richmond train station, where she is determined to depart for London against her doctor's orders. Virginia explodes in hyperbole when Leonard demands that she stay, first saying with a sigh, "I'm living a life I have no wish to life," before screaming with wide eyes, "I'm dying in this town!" As she paces anxiously about the deserted platform, her frizzed hair slipping from beneath her floppy hat, she appears desperate for an escape from a torturous life, from the "the deep dark" that she wrestles with by herself. An ultimatum indicates the gravity of her despair; when Virginia says, "If it is a choice between Richmond and death, then I choose death," she seems hopelessly committed to the latter. Later, when Leonard asks his wife why she must kill off a character in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she explains, "Someone has to die so that the rest of us should value life more." And when she says, "the poet will die" we assume that Woolf is making this prophecy for herself. She appears in the film as a martyr, constantly obsessing over an ultimate demise that will release her from her madness.⁶⁵

The film also accentuates an image of Woolf as a troubled “visionary,” as a look at its promotional trailer makes quite evident. The trailer to *The Hours* begins with a scene in which Woolf mutters to herself while her sister, niece, and nephews enjoy tea. The first glimpse of her reveals that she lives “two lives: the life she’s leading and also the books she’s writing,” unable to socialize with other human beings without composing drafts in her head. A shot of Woolf’s hand reaching into a jar of pens demonstrates a fervent dedication to her work; she is absorbed by her writing above all else, to the point that she is almost equated with her pen. Another shot zooms in on Woolf’s hand scribbling away as she narrates the first line of *Mrs. Dalloway* aloud (see Figure 5). With a cigarette hanging between her fingers and a remote gaze, Woolf is the picture of the romantic writer who lives only to pour her soul into her work (see Figure 6). Oscar-caliber actors like Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, Ed Harris, and Toni Collette performing in roles that all link to her novel lend preeminence and prestige to Woolf’s image (the high-quality brand of Miramax Films and the score of Philip Glass are further examples). From a high angle, we see Woolf smoking in her study, pages splayed out on the floor in front of her as sunlight spills through her windows. She is presented as an artist whose talents are all-consuming. Her writing is her life; she will not rest until it reaches brilliance.⁶⁶

Hermione Lee’s essay about how *The Hours* failed to represent what Woolf was “really” like serves as a publicity text, for it seeks to “give a privileged access to the real person of the star”⁶⁷ that moves beyond what the film and its promotion tell us. In interviews and articles that surrounded *The Hours*, however, Nicole Kidman also claims a certain access to Woolf. Wendy Parkins argues that Kidman’s star image makes a monster out of Woolf. If Kidman had to completely transform herself to play Woolf, as so many critics claimed (or to be “liberated from her own prettiness” as screenwriter David Hare put it), then Woolf comes across as ugly and unfeminine in contrast to Kidman’s beauty and grace.⁶⁸ The infamous prosthetic

nose that Kidman wore in the film is a prime example of this characterization by default—if a beautiful actress needs to undergo hours in the makeup chair to be “invisible as Woolf,”⁶⁹ then how repulsive and charmless must Woolf be? In the collision of Kidman’s and Woolf’s two star images, then, Woolf is portrayed as hideous and inelegant in addition to tragic and tortured. Kidman, of course, suggests nothing so grotesque in her descriptions of Woolf, but in the publicity texts that surround *The Hours*, she contributes to an image of her as disturbed and fragile. Consider an interview that Kidman gave with *The Guardian*, in which she explains what attracted her to the role of Woolf:

Her honesty. Her perceptiveness? The way in which she was so embracing of the complications of life. And who we are, what we are, why. She just has a very, very clear voice, Virginia. Which is interesting because her psyche was so complicated? What she was grappling with was so complicated.⁷⁰

Kidman addresses the complexity of Woolf, both explicitly and in her doubtful tone. Yet while she celebrates this complexity, she closes by attributing it to Woolf’s mental struggles, to the “grappling[s]” of her troubled “psyche.” Kidman’s interviewer expands on this depiction of Woolf as a madwoman, at one point even substituting “the suicidal writer”⁷¹ for her name. When he claims, “Kidman herself appears to have uncovered hidden depths,”⁷² he implies that Woolf serves as her model—she is “hidden,” mysterious, disquieted. And by comparing the trauma of Kidman’s divorce from Tom Cruise to Woolf’s tragic death, the journalist underscores the horror of Woolf’s mental anguish. “It’s no coincidence that the only role [Kidman] felt capable playing in the year following the split was that of Virginia Woolf,” he declares. For just like Woolf, the actress is “a woman fighting a daily battle between love and personal demons who is eventually dragged underwater by the current.”⁷³ Here,

Woolf appears as an Ophelia figure, constantly tormented by her unstable mind, driven to death by her madness.

Many reviews of *The Hours* presented a tormented Woolf as well, a Woolf who is “strong on ferocity but lacking in charm”⁷⁴ as Hermione Lee says. In a review for *The Chicago Tribune*, Michael Caro summarizes Woolf’s role in the film as follows: “Woolf . . . writes [*Mrs. Dalloway*] while fighting off the demons that eventually would cause her to take her own life.”⁷⁵ Again, Woolf is defined by her deep mental illness, constantly possessed by thoughts of suicide. “Virginia is frail and indomitable” he says, the tragic combination of a sick mind and a stubborn temperament. As Woolf occupies a central position in *The Hours*, she is a victim of the “fatalism of [its] worldview,” destined to succumb to the power of her “demons” despite her own best efforts. Mick LaSalle of *The San Francisco Chronicle* called Woolf “a combination literary genius/indoor cat” in his review of *The Hours*, describing her as a “drifter in her own home” with a “strain on her psyche [that] could prove fatal.”⁷⁶ LaSalle’s Woolf is, again, distant and troubled, brilliant but hopelessly damaged. Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* depicted Woolf as a madwoman, too, in a version not short on hyperbole. To Holden, she is “a woman besieged by excruciating bouts of mental illness.” She represents “the savage inner war waged by a brilliant mind against a system of faulty wiring that transmits a searing, crazy static into her brain.”⁷⁷ She is agonized, she is frenzied, she is ravaged. She suffers for her immense talent and her tenacity. As these reviewers cut back and forth between the “Woolfian figures”⁷⁸ of *The Hours*, they present the figure of Woolf as intense and insane.

Thus, *The Hours* and its surrounding promotion, publicity, and criticism seem to amplify one of the images of Woolf that emerged from *Time* magazine in 1937—that of the “sensitive, cloistered woman”⁷⁹ who obsesses over her work and neglects her appearance. Of course, by 2002, the details of Woolf’s mental strife and horrific death had long since been revealed. In some ways, those more macabre aspects of her image became wrapped up in her iconicity,

casting a pall over the images of her that developed in her lifetime. In 1982, *Saturday Review* writer Helen Dudar compared Woolf to another tragic star, suggesting that the “special circumstances of her life and work”⁸⁰—her “real-life melodramas,”⁸¹ as Neal Gabler would put it—make her famous and fascinating to audiences. Because of “[her] front-and-center seat in the Bloomsbury circle; [her] sieges of madness; [her] odd, sheltering marriage . . . [and] the moment, alas, in 1941 when, fearing the return of insanity, she loaded her pockets with rocks and walked in the river Ouse,” Virginia Woolf is “the Marilyn Monroe of academia,”⁸² an illustrious life cut short by her own devices, and yet a star who cannot be snuffed. Though *The Hours* may depict a less complex image of Woolf than the ones that evolved during her lifetime—one that unites genius with pain and darkness—it does not nullify those previous images. *The Hours* and its trailers, posters, stars, publicity, and criticism cannot affirm who Woolf really is with more certainty than *Vogue* or *Time* or Bass Ale or Facebook. The mere fact that Woolf continues to be “versioned”—to be portrayed as “this” or “that”—indicates that there are multiple “thisses” and “thats” to make of her in the first place. Because of the depth and breadth of her complexity, she receives star billing next to Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep, and Julianne Moore, however big-nosed, anguished, and tragic she appears.

The Complex Totality of Virginia Woolf

If the trajectory of Virginia Woolf’s stardom proves nothing else, it is that her image undergoes continual revision. As Lee promises, “The Nose is her latest and most popular incarnation, but she won’t stay fixed under it forever.”⁸³ Indeed, this is because Woolf has never been fixed. In her ambivalence about occupying a place in popular culture and her refusal to present herself as any one type, Woolf allowed her image to gain diversity and complexity. The “queer individuality”⁸⁴ that she sought to project was appropriated and represented by her many and disparate star texts, from British *Vogue* in the 1920s to *The Hours* in 2002. All of the images developed by

those texts constitute her enduring stardom. She is feminine and fashionable and progressive, as *Vogue* suggests. She is imposing and accessible and secluded, as *Time* suggests. She is a poet and an inspiration, as her contemporary fans say, as iconic and breathtaking as Greta Garbo. She is radical in her politics and strong in her intellect, as her feminist disciples say, worthy of inscription on t-shirts. She is depressed and anxious in her brilliance, chain-smoking her way through madness, as *The Hours* portrays her. She is sharp and witty and bright, as her biographer contests. She is the product of her troubled psyche despite all of her luminous insights, to paraphrase Nicole Kidman. “Moody” and “suicidal,”⁸⁵ plagued by personal “demons,”⁸⁶ she is a romantic tortured genius, to paraphrase *The Hours’* critics. None of these various versions of Woolf overshadow or negate any others, though in some cases they certainly conflict. Woolf, as a star, is the “complex totality” of all of them, fascinating for how many meanings she produces at once and for how long she continues to produce those meanings.

The truth about who or what Woolf “really” is is irrelevant if not impossible to ascertain. As an image, she becomes what her audiences make of her. She is subjective, plastic, manipulatable. The fact that she appears to be surfing the web alongside her 3,293 Facebook fans, posting albums and notes sixty-seven years after her death, suggests that she very much “belongs” to her viewers, and what she does for them “matters enormously,” to borrow the insights of one of her devoted fans.⁸⁷ Woolf’s audiences, then, are the most essential agents in the continuation of her stardom, creating their own “truths” about her in the absence of any certain knowledge of her “real” person. And my “true” Woolf would likely agree with this idea. In a letter addressed to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf’s own words best explain how her audiences approach her, in all of her complex forms: “Do we then know nobody? Only our own versions of them, which, as likely as not, are emanations from ourselves.”⁸⁸



Figure 1. Adeline Virginia Woolf neé Stephen's Facebook picture

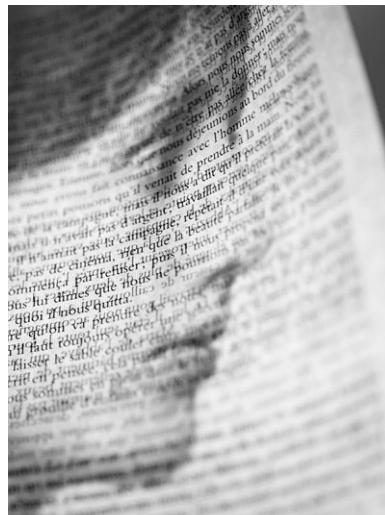


Figure 2. A "Fan Photo" of Virginia Woolf, Facebook

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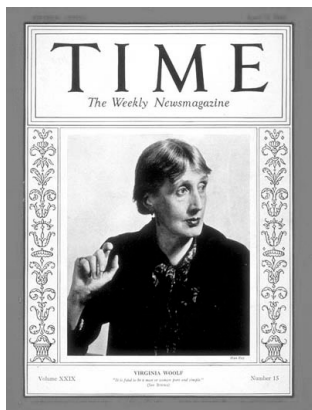


Figure 3. Virginia Woolf on the cover of *Time*, 1937



Figure 4. Still from *The Hours*



Figure 5. Still from *The Hours*



Figure 6. Still from *The Hours*

Endnotes

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- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
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- ⁴² Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon*, 90.
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